LETTI PARK

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Coal

The coal came that morning. We'd got up early and put the last of the wood into the stove; then we went to stand out on the street in front of the house with our hands in our jacket pockets, freezing in the morning fog, watching the clouds formed by our breath. The coal arrived punctually; we signalled to the dump truck to come through the narrow alley between the barn and the tractor shed and as close as possible to the stable in which for years no animal had been housed. The briquettes clattered down onto the winter grass, a big pile, good coal, hardly any broken pieces, and silvery coal dust rose into the air.

We spent the morning shovelling coal from the lawn

into the barn. Seven tonnes of coal; we used shovels and pitchforks, and at first we formed a chain, but then that seemed pointless, and each of us went ahead working on his own. The fog dissipated, and the sun came out; we caught sight of a few wary birds in the bare branches of the bushes. Around noon we took a break. We made coffee and sat down on the stable doorsill that had been worn by the feet of people looking after their animals decades ago. We drank the coffee and talked about how long the new supply of coal would last. Seven tonnes – seven winters? We said, Depends on the winter; and we thought of last winter, which had been incredibly cold and long, an icy winter with snow that lasted into May. We compared the present winter with previous winters, and we talked about possible signs: the tree bark had been especially thick this year, and there had been more nuts than in previous years; we said, Maybe this winter would be even colder than the last. But with this new supply of coal nothing could happen to us. With seven tonnes of coal in the barn we were safe.

After we'd finished our coffee, we dumped the grounds on the grass. For a moment longer we continued to sit on the doorsill; our work was almost done; there wasn't much coal left outside, only a semicircle like a barricade around us.

Vincent came into the yard riding his bicycle through the gate to the street that we hadn't yet closed after the dump truck left. Vincent was four years old; as far as we knew he would soon be five. He came swerving around the corner and saw us immediately, and he rolled towards us on his

bike through the alley between the barn and the tractor shed, stopping on the other side of the coal barricade. He was wearing a green jacket, a neatly tied scarf, and a hat, and he didn't have a runny nose. He sat on his bike with his crossed arms propped on the handlebars as if he were fifteen years old, not just four.

He looked at us and said, What are you doing. Matter-of-factly. He said it quite matter-of-factly, and we said, We've been waiting for you; we're shovelling coal; you can give us a hand.

Vincent's mother died last winter. His father had left her, and as a result at first she had a nervous breakdown and then she got sick. Or the other way around: She first got sick and then had a nervous breakdown, but this didn't matter because with her death it all came to the same thing. She had had a protracted case of the flu, and then her heart was affected and because of that she had a stroke, then another, and a third, and eventually they stopped counting the strokes. She had lain in the hospital for three months and towards the end she was blind, could no longer speak, and was able to move only her left foot; the doctors had measured her brainwaves and were of the opinion that in some mysterious way she was still there, and they called this condition being-locked-inside-oneself. Vincent's mother had locked herself up inside herself when Vincent was four years old.

We were sitting with our empty coffee cups in the wintry

midday sun, facing the barricade of coal. We were hot from working and wide awake. We talked with Vincent; we asked him if, on his way to our place, he'd been stopped by the beaver; we told him that the beaver stopped any children going too fast on their bicycles and told them to slow down. But Vincent was no fool. He said, That's a lot of rubbish, and he got so angry that we stopped talking to him that way. We watched him, as he sat there on his bike, rolling back and forth a little, and suggested that he could get his little wheelbarrow and help us get the last of the coal into the stable; he looked like someone who was missing an invisible half; but he also looked like someone enveloped by half a halo.

We thought of his mother who had been an attractive woman, tall and fragile, with an inimitable, awkward way of moving her long legs, like a foal. She had always made a wistful impression, but at times we had heard her ranting, and then she sounded anything but helpless. In the first weeks of her illness, we visited her in the hospital ward where she was lying; by that time she was already blind and kept saying, It's too bad that I can't see your beautiful faces.

It's too bad that I can't see your beautiful faces.

We hadn't known that for Vincent's mother our faces had been beautiful, and we went home with the realisation that there are some things you can only say after they're gone forever.

Vincent got off his bike and let go of it. He picked up a

piece of coal, turned it this way and that, checking it out, then he climbed over the rampart, walked right through the middle of our group and dropped it on the pile in the corner of the stable. He came back, casually holding on to us for support. After his mother had died, he had asked his father how long death would last; his father had told us that.

Vincent said, I think I'll forget about the wheelbarrow. I can help you without the wheelbarrow too.

And so we got up from the doorsill, took a few steps to exercise our legs and, with our hands on the backs of our hips, we stretched in the winter sun; then we continued. We got the rest of the coal into the stable; we formed another chain, and Vincent helped us. His mother had shown us that one could die of love. She had been living proof that one can die of a broken heart; she had locked herself inside herself out of love. It was odd to think that this would govern Vincent's entire life, and we took the coal from his little dirty hands like holy wafers.

Fetish

There's a fire behind the circus caravan when Ella comes back from the river, but she can't see Carl anywhere. Maybe Carl has left again. The fire has been neatly made, equal-sized pieces of wood carefully laid against each other; it isn't smoky, is burning cleanly and will keep burning for quite a while. Carl has piled up fresh wood against the edge of the fireplace, a circle of fieldstones that have turned white from the ashes. The cut edges of the wood are light-coloured; the wood is not heavy. Next to it there's brushwood. On the folding chair by the fireplace, a blanket.

The circus caravan is old, painted red and blue; the paint is flaking. At the narrow end a stairway leads up to the door;

two little windows face the meadow. Thistles and faded dandelions grow in profusion around the wheels. Ella goes up the steps and opens the door; it's possible Carl has gone to lie down; she knows he hasn't. The bed is made and empty. It's warm inside the caravan. Carl has also lit the stove. The furnishings are simple, a folding table, two chairs, one of which is standing outside next to the fire. The stove in the corner, a clothesline stretching from one wall to the other, and on the shelf above the bed, one single book, a creased, dog-eared copy of *The Death Ship* by Traven. Ella's suitcase stands next to the door. Carl's backpack isn't there, but that doesn't mean anything; he always takes the backpack with him, never lets it out of his sight.

Ella leans against the open door for a while, looking into the caravan. The wind causes a draft in the stove. A spider waits in the web above the folding table. The inside of the caravan smells of the two of them. She closes the door, goes down the stairs and sits on the folding chair by the open fire. Far away, the lights are on in the house on the other side of the unmowed meadow; the other circus caravans, all in a row but a certain distance apart from one another, are dark. When Carl and Ella arrived in the afternoon, they saw a skeletal figure, all skin and bones, wearing a sari and tattooed up to her neck, sitting on the stairs leading up to the caravan next to theirs; she had jumped up and fled into her caravan as if they had interrupted her in the performance of some basic function. Now the door is locked; above it, something decorated with feathers and branches is turning in the wind; from a distance it looks like the skull

of an animal – a ferret? A rat, a weasel. The fire hisses. Ella can hear the birds down by the river, the hard beating of their wings. Graylag geese; on her way down to the river she had startled them in the meadows along the banks, and they had risen in swarms and circled over the water, clamouring and honking. The land on the other side of the river was wild and uninhabited. In the distance, a tower. Not a soul in sight. The river was flowing fast, full of eddies and whirlpools in the middle. It was already too cold to go into the water. She had walked for a while downstream, then turned and come back.

And so she simply continues to sit by the fire. She definitely won't go over to the house, or go over there to those other people; she doesn't know them at all; they're people Carl knows. He had introduced Ella to the others, just briefly; he had left it up to her either to sit down with them or to go back to their own caravan. Up close, the skeletal figure, a girl – her tattoos depicting a swarm of blowfish with bristling spines – turned out to be unexpectedly approachable, as did the extraordinarily large man to whom the house, the caravans, the meadow belonged. People who had an intense way of looking at you. People with eyes like hot coals. Barefoot, suntanned children, women wearing amulets around their necks, and a blind old man with a carved sceptre. Water carafes filled with stones stood on the long table – amethyst and rose quartz; the tattooed girl answered Ella's question about the stones, looking past her and pronouncing the words deliberately and meaningfully. In a corner of

the room, a rainmaker; above the stove, a shrine to Buddha. Faded Tibetan prayer flags hung suspended between the birch trees in front of the house. There was nothing objectionable. But in spite of that Ella had gone back to her caravan, and she'll now remain sitting there; she has a feeling that Carl would want it that way, and she also feels he is somewhere nearby, watching her. Watching her from the house or from one of the other caravans or from a hiding place among the trees or the sloppily piled-up stacks of wood. If she does everything right, he'll come back.

When the fire is almost out, she puts on more of the freshly cut wood. Just as Carl did – each piece upright and laid against the others at a slant. For the first time in her life she is keeping a fire going. It's working better than she thought it would; the wood is dry and burns readily. And in spite of that it's difficult because she doesn't want to let the fire get too big; she is afraid that if it gets too big, someone might come to join her; the girl or someone else from the other caravans, or in the worst of cases, the man who owns the house, the caravans and the meadow; the thought that he might come over, relaxed and self-assured, wearing felt boots and a sheepskin over his shoulders, fills Ella with unease. It would be quite impossible for her to be there with him in case Carl were to turn up again. She doesn't know when Carl will come back; actually she doesn't know if he will ever come back, but when and if he comes back and finds her sitting by the fire with that man – by the fire that he, Carl, lit for her – it would be a disaster. So she keeps the

fire small. Just big enough to warm her, yet small enough so that it won't attract anyone's attention to her. No one's except Carl's. It works to a certain extent.

It's amazing how dark it gets at some point. Night falls and it is totally dark. The moon is oily; the light in the house at the far end of the meadow is a sharply outlined square. Animals are rustling in the grass around the caravan, and the wind blowing through the trees makes their branches creak. Ella thinks she hears a door in the house slam shut, and cars driving away. She unfolds the blanket and wraps it around herself. She doesn't hear the boy coming, but suddenly he is there. He stands by the fire, across from Ella, and at first his face, illuminated from below, has a predatory look. Then she recognises him; she met him that afternoon; he belongs with someone from one of the other circus caravans, a traveller, as much a stranger here as she herself is. He is maybe seven years old; she has trouble judging children's ages, but she thinks that at this hour he ought to be lying in bed, sleeping.

How late is it?

She says this to him instead of hello, and he shrugs.

She says, Would you like to sit down here with me, and he nods, and she goes and gets the second chair from inside the caravan; apparently her fire is the right size for a little boy. She puts the chair next to hers, and he sits down. His legs dangle just off the ground. He immediately gazes gravely into the fire as if it might go out before he has really observed it, or as if he were afraid that if he doesn't really

look into the fire, Ella might send him away. It's clear that, in contrast to her, he has sat at many fires. He poses no problem for Ella. A boy – a little boy with shaggy hair, trousers that are too short, a hoodie and dirty trainers without laces – a little boy like that would not be a problem for Ella if Carl should come back.

Then he takes his eyes off the fire and looks up into the sky. He looks at the caravan; he looks at Ella out of the corner of his eyes. They talk a little. The boy asks Ella how many stars there are, his voice sounding rough and scratchy, and the tone of voice indicating that he already knows the correct answer.

Well, how many stars are there then.

Ella says, Oh, no idea. I have no idea. Infinitely many?

The boy says, in affirmation, Right there, above us, there are a thousand. About a thousand. Then there's the Milky Way too.

And Black Holes, Ella says.

Yes, Black Holes, the boy says. Huge, fat Black Holes. Nobody knows what's on the far side. What's supposed to be inside them.

Ella hesitates; then she says, But the Universe is falling asleep. Did you know that? It's falling asleep; the stars will go out. A lot of them have already gone out.

This prospect seems not to surprise the boy. He nods and says nothing for a while; then he takes a stick and pokes around in the fire. Expertly he adds more wood. Ella finds him unusually serious and quiet in an adult way, but his face